

In a Dark Time, the Eye Begins to See:  
Plumbing the Subtle Depths of Alchemical Saturn

by Anita Doyle

The desk at which I sit to write is set before a window that looks directly onto the sea. The view inspires reflection, as one might imagine. Writing is another matter—water dissolves! But when I gazed out that window on the morning that I had determined to begin the work of writing this piece on alchemical Saturn, I discovered that the previous night's stormy sea had thrown up an image that was in startling accord with my intention. The decaying corpse of an hulking bull sea lion had been deposited on the beach, not more than 50 yards from where I sat. At first merely marveling at the horrific, compelling sight of this, I walked down for a closer look. The alchemical resonances surfaced soon enough: the death of a kingly "lion," *mortifacio* ... *putrefaction* ... *nigredo* ... *olutio*. Following Nature, as the alchemist is instructed always to do, I took note of the direction She had provided for this little work on the Great Work, whose true beginning, Michael Maier tells us, is invariably with the Grim Reaper:

Saturn is the first to be present, and is proof of the truth that the beginning has been found, for nothing comes into being without blackness [...]. When you see the blackness delight, for it is the beginning of your work [...]. Blackness is Saturn, the Discoverer of Truth [...]. The first regimen of Saturn is to putrefy (de Jong 120).

As a practicing archetypal astrologist, I am in daily conversation with people about the symbolic nature of the psychological times through which they are moving. With a frequency that defies statistical probability—since Saturn is only one of ten celestial bodies with which modern astrology is primarily concerned—as often as not we are talking about that planet and its archetypal field. Still, there's no mystery in this. Challenging transits of Saturn to the birth chart are frequently experienced as painfully difficult to navigate at both inner and outer levels. They tend to be marked by such themes as inertia, depression, loss, restriction, austerity, limitation,

and a pervasive sense that life has been drained of meaning and purpose. It is hard to gain any sort of comforting perspective during a time in which Saturn rules; his leaden gravity feels inescapable, debilitating. “What is called for?” we are desperate to know. “What is this heaviness *for?*”

In the throes of such a transit a young poet wrote to me: “I am a blindwoman at the center of a huge and empty cave. Silence weighs on me like a mother’s grief.” The poet Rilke evokes a similar image when he writes in his *Book of Hours*:

It is possible that I am pushing through solid rock [...]  
And I am so far in, I see no end  
and no distance: everything is close to my face,  
and everything close to my face is stone (55).

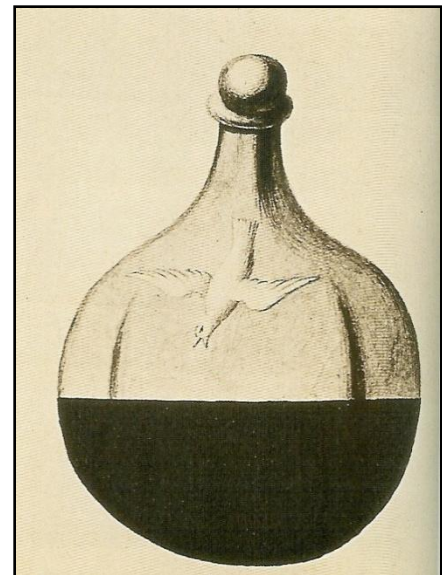
The stony implacability of these images perfectly reflects psyche’s feeling tone under the cold, hard influence of Saturn, referred to by the alchemists as *Sol Niger*, the black sun.

Yet, this is by no means all of what Saturn is about. Poets and artists working from within this psychological field are sometimes able to reveal a glimpse of the transformation potentiated by Saturn’s dark grip on the heart. The line from a Theodore Roethke poem that forms the primary title of this essay does this. In the same poem (“In a Dark Time”), Roethke goes on to say, as though in call and response to my client’s image, that there may be more to darkness than initially meets the eye: “That place among the rocks - is it a cave/ Or a winding path?” (231.) The poem in its entirety could be fruitfully studied as the sober, mystical and quite remarkable testament of one who has passed through the trials of Saturn and lived—or rather, “died”—to tell about it. We will return to the poem in the summary.

Meanwhile, the question of what it is that “the eye begins to see” in a Saturnian time is the question that guides this writing. The hermeneutics, already in play, consist of a sort of *lectio divina*, in which an alchemical or natural image or portion of text relative to Saturn is

contemplated and allowed to interact with the forces of spiritual and psychological imagination. This approach is in particular attunement with the influence of the *melan khole*, or “black bile” associated with Saturn, which the Florentine Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino said “provokes the spirit to gather itself together, remain together and assiduously contemplate” (Moore, 172.) Although he warned against the dangers of a completely unmitigated Saturnian dominion and made prescriptive suggestions for preventing that, Ficino “esteemed the ‘black gall’ of the saturnine-melancholic humour as a state of mind that prompted flights of [...] genius and profound self knowledge” (Roob, 203). This is certainly borne out in the lives of Roethke and Rilke, both of whom have a tight conjunction of the Moon and Saturn in their natal charts, representing the intimate and inextricable binding up of their feeling/sensing/receptive natures with the Dark God. The particular qualities of imagination which this hard coupling of planetary archetypes leads to the inner vision of each man ultimately lead him to the interior receptivity and steady holding of creative tension that a wise approach to Saturn requires if we are not to be merely crushed by his *gravitas*.

Because it links to the image of black bile, this simple engraving provides another entry point for our contemplations. It depicts a sealed, clear glass retort with black, presumably liquid, matter filling the lower half. Above this, also contained within the vessel, is a white dove. It does not appear to be hovering so much as diving toward the black humor, its beak opened wide. Could the bird actually be singing as it goes? The angle of its descent does not suggest that it intends to take a genteel sip of the bile on



the fly, but to plunge right in. It will swallow and be swallowed by the dark stuff, the chaotic, disagreeable sludge that the alchemists also named *prima materia*. What is going on here? The mind balks. Isn't the dove a symbol of the purified soul? Indeed, in certain alchemical drawings, the whitening of the raven or crow depicts the completion of the soul's cleansing. Here, though, the movement is intentionally in the opposite direction. The artist gives us a clue to what is going on by titling this image "*Purgatio*." It is not meant to be an image of completion, in other words, but of process; the purging is still underway, and the active agent of that process is symbolized by the dove.

In his lush book of collected and annotated alchemical imagery called *Alchemy & Mysticism*, Alexander Roob writes that an image of an *ascending* bird in a retort represents "the distillation of philosophical mercury," whereas "the descending bird indicates that the distillate must be repeatedly poured onto the physical residue" (131). In following Paracelsus by naming the distillate "philosophical mercury," Roob may be intending to make clear that the process he is describing is primarily, if not entirely, an interior, psychospiritual one, with philosophical mercury referring to the spirit of consciousness itself. The bird as image of that spirit represents both the rising quality of insight that may precipitate out of difficult experience, and the need for that increase in consciousness to be continuously poured back out into the world. This particular emblem seems to take that a step further. The dove is, as we have noted, seemingly doing more than pouring its distilled understanding or clarified consciousness upon the world; it is diving right back into the muck.

Taoist alchemy places special emphasis on this reverse movement on the part of consciousness. Using terms such as "entering the dragon's pool" and "hauling a boat through mud and water" (Cleary, 333), the old Chinese adepts were pointing to the necessity of actively

using the adversity of life in the world to develop the gold elixir of enlightenment. To their understanding—given voice through the writings of a particular eighteenth century adept named Liu I-ming—the goal of the art was nothing other than the re-awakening of the primordial, unconditioned mind. This is the birthright state of unified consciousness that is covered over by the confused and unbalanced states in which essentially all human beings are accustomed to live and act. Reversing the process of conditioning through entering the dragon’s pool with an



attitude of alert observation, “withdrawing from fixations and obsessions so that the mind cannot be manipulated by external or internal events” (336), was/is seen as enlivening original mind, referred to as “the furnace,” in which the dross of leaden thought is refined away.<sup>1</sup>

A European Renaissance version of this process is depicted in this image from the famed *Splendor Solis* paintings, in which we find a bearded man sitting in a cylindrical pool of black water. Henderson and Sherwood call the bearded man “the alchemist” (96), while Roob quotes an eighteenth century writer who

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<sup>1</sup> Taoist alchemists speak of true lead and false lead. False lead consists of the mental fixations, but true lead—what we are calling here Saturn—is what remains when the dross of the false is burned off: “firmness and gravity, which stabilizes the volatile ‘mercury’ of the mind” (Cleary 337).

says this is “Saturn, baptized in his own waters” (198). There is really no contradiction here: for better or worse, we are, each of us, an embodiment of Saturn when we stew in the inner cauldron of putrefying thought and feeling. Here again the white dove, the holy spirit of distilled, clarified consciousness appears, precipitated out of Saturn as he sits with focused, meditative intent in that water, which is heated by a furnace. An alchemist or puffer kneels by the furnace, keenly watching Saturn’s subtle movements and those of the dove of consciousness, and ready to adjust the fire—hotter, cooler—accordingly. He is the true practitioner of the art in us, the one willing to work with attentive, patient observation in a painful Saturnian time, with an eye to refining and refining and refining consciousness until all of the acquired impediments to its clear, simple, natural --and vastly more radiant--expression have been removed.

Ever mindful of the centrality of Saturn to the Work, alchemists often portray him, emblematically, as their assistant. In this role he is pictured as hobbled, impaired, nearly naked, and yet serenely going about the task of bringing water to the tree of the Sun and the Moon, the tree of Illumination.

Why hobbled? Why the humble demeanor in the great

progenitor of the

Work? My thoughts return to the sea lion on the beach, once formidable in his domain, now lifeless, his flesh hanging in tatters. The mortification of the lion or king is a key motif in the Saturnian *nigredo*. We are talking about the dethroning of that aspect of consciousness



which regards itself as pre-eminent and in command, and which is ceaselessly engaged in the outer struggle for recognition and its rewards. There is something about the direct encounter with the reality of a dead body and its putrefaction that dislodges, even if only temporarily, one's delusions in this regard. Where does the battle for dominance get us, in the end? Everything that is born, dies. Tibetan monks meditate in charnel grounds to stay close to this truth, to see through it to That in themselves and in all that exists, which is never born, and therefore never dies.

Prosaically, and echoing the image of hobbled Saturn as the alchemists' assistant, challenging transits of Saturn to the birthchart, especially at around age 59, when it makes its second return to the same place in the zodiac that it occupied at a person's birth, are not infrequently accompanied by physical issues related to the knees—which fall under Saturn's rulership. This is an out-picturing of the awkward humbling process underway within, in which old ambitions and the capacities which sustained them fail us; like it or not, they fall away. Ultimately, the challenge posed by the hobbled, humbled Lord of Time is to release the outer goals as ends in themselves, and to realize that our task consists in nothing more nor less than being faithful water bearers to the Tree of Life, primordial pure awareness. As Liu I-ming puts it: “Outwardly one is lacking. Inwardly one has more than enough” (Cleary, 83).

And so, this brings us back around to Theodore Roethke's poem, which I encourage you to read through once or twice before continuing, even if you're familiar with it (the poem appears in its entirety at the end of this essay). We'll take it piece by piece as a way of opening toward actually feeling the potential inherent in a Saturnian time.

In a dark time, the eye begins to see,  
I meet my shadow in the deepening shade;  
I hear my echo in the echoing wood—



Roethke starts with what could reasonably be the enlightened conclusion of a lesser poem: what passes for sight in the lit up world, he tells us, is blindness. The eye *begins* to see only when the familiar markers of our habitual lives disappear and we are at a loss to know how to find our way meaningfully back into life. What *is* it that the eye begins to see? Behold: the deepening shade and the echo in the wood that scare me - they are *my* shadow, *my* echo. I have projected my fears onto the world. Roethke invites us into compassionate recognition of the absurdity of this:

A lord of nature weeping to a tree,  
I live between the heron and the wren,  
Beasts of the hill and serpents of the den.

What's madness but nobility of soul  
At odds with circumstance?

We are like the hapless son of the heavenly parents in the *Hymn of the Pearl*; we have forgotten who we are. We are lords of nature, and yet a tree, a heron, a wren, “beasts of the hill and serpents of the den” know what we despair to know: that there is no separation between them and the natural world; they belong, utterly. The disjunction within our psyches, this inability of our noble souls to be at peace with what is, to feel at home with what *is* as the rest of nature does, is the hallmark of our species’ nearly universal neurosis. It is not, in fact, possible to be truly separated from the seamless fabric of unity. How could it be? We would cease to exist. But imagining that we are and being marooned in that delusion generates massive suffering. This is what the Taoist alchemists understood so thoroughly, and why the reversion to original, unconditioned mind was explicitly made the “gold elixir” of their work. And as the poet here accustoms his eyes to the dark, an unexpected, immanent luminosity opens up:

The day's on fire!  
I know the purity of pure despair,  
My shadow pinned against a sweating wall,



That place among the rocks—is it a cave,  
Or winding path? The edge is what I have.

A steady storm of correspondences!  
A night flowing with birds, a ragged moon,  
And in broad day the midnight come again!

The psychic energy has shifted dramatically.

Exclamation points abound. We are not talking about an erasure of the dark by light (“Dark, dark, my light,” he says later on); that would be abandoning Saturn for Jupiter or Sol. On the contrary, he is seeing through Saturn’s eyes, *seeing* the dark, without the blinders of conditioning that



would call it terrifying—and there is a strange and fiery ecstasy in that. The *purity* of pure despair! “A steady storm of correspondences” fly from the mind as it is plunged into the deep furnace of insight. And could “a night flowing with birds” be the transmutation of a sleepless mind burdened by flights of dark thoughts? Now that he *sees*, without fear or judgment, the sudden darkening of his day mind as well, it becomes for him a natural wonder—a solar eclipse!—before which he stands astonished.

A man goes far to find out what he is--  
Death of the self in a long, tearless night,  
All natural shapes blazing unnatural light.

When the doors of perception are cleansed, as William Blake famously said, everything appears as it is: infinite. This is the open secret toward which, all along, the poem has been moving. The *mortifacio*, the death of the experience of a separate “self” while still in life, is what makes the freefall into *coniunctio* with existence possible. Mystical traditions speak of this in such

metaphors as “the drop falling into the ocean,” a mortifying defeat for ego in anticipation, but the deepest liberation of consciousness after the fact.

Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.  
My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,  
Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is *I*?

There couldn't be a more apt metaphor. Who hasn't had the experience of opening a window to allow a trapped, buzzing fly its freedom, only to have it fly panicked in the opposite direction—again and again? We are like that, Roethke says; the open window to union, to releasing our small, fearful “I” to its birthright-but-forgotten oneness with All, it's right there before us—but we can't decide: “Which I is *I*?” In this moment, for Roethke, the true “I” prevails...

A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.  
The mind enters itself, and God the mind,  
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

... and it's a sign of the authenticity of the experience that the tearing wind of the storm in his psyche does not disappear, but because he is one, not two, the psychological resistance that causes suffering does. He is free, and free in the only abidingly meaningful way.

This is the freedom, the “enlightenment,” that—from a psychospiritual perspective—is the true gold of the alchemical opus, and that toward which dark Saturn would turn us. By means of the obstructions he throws up to extraverted business as usual—the outer failures, the storms in the mind—a quiet desperation is evoked that certain souls, at any rate, may discover is a powerful incentive to letting the separate and separating “little” King in us be killed. And while it's inevitable that even once the sweet wine of this *coniunctio* has been deeply drunk, the fly that is the mind will continue buzzing “Which I is *I*?”, the eye that has seen all the way through can never be truly confounded by the question again. What has been seen cannot be unseen, and what has been lived cannot be unlived.

The corpse of the sea lion stayed on the beach for days, after which an unusually high tide came in and carried it away. The drop returned to the ocean. “The Tao does nothing, yet nothing remains undone.” Seamless Nature. The King is dead. Long live the King.

IN A DARK TIME

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~ Theodore Roethke

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